

VOCABULARY STUDY SHEET: THE ODYSSEY BACKLASH

Vocabulary Enrichment & Text Analysis for Prep-School Students (TSI) — Max 2 Pages

Lupita Nyong'o has suffered vicious attacks on her appearance as she stars as Helen of Troy. It's exhausting and triggering. Whenever the cast is announced for a new adaptation of a classic, I'm filled with dread. Every single time I **brace myself**, body and soul, for the keyboard-warrior "debates" — using that word loosely — that **spawn** when a character has been "raceswapped".

Take the idea of Idris Elba playing James Bond: despite being nothing more than a rumour, it turned into a circus because Elba, unlike the men who came before him, is Black. Cue the **loons** who have a hard time separating fiction from reality. "You can't have a Black James Bond!" "The woke police are at it again." "White lives matter too." If only James Bond was a fictional character and the colour of his skin had nothing to do with how convincingly he could shoot a gun, seduce a woman or jump from burning buildings. It's laughable, really.

But all this becomes even more sinister when it's a Black woman in the firing line. In Christopher Nolan's latest triumph, his ambitious, visually stunning version of Homer's Odyssey, the Oscar-winning Lupita Nyong'o plays Helen of Troy — the face that launched 1,000 ships.

For those unfamiliar with the Greek myth — "myth" being the operative word — Helen, formerly of Sparta, fell in love with Paris, a Trojan, while married to King Menelaus. Thus began the war of Troy, with the Greeks gathering under the leadership of Agamemnon (Menelaus's brother) in a bid to bring her home. Nolan's interpretation differs slightly from the original epic, making Helen a victim of Agamemnon's ambition and **scapegoat** for the war. It's this change that, with less than 10 minutes' overall screen time, gives Nyong'o the space to deliver the unexpected. She plays two characters (who might look the same but couldn't be more opposite — the other being Clytemnestra, wife of Agamemnon) and expresses anger, pain, guilt, desire and regal majesty in an impactful and refreshing performance. She does in under 10 minutes what a lot of actors can't do in two hours.

brace oneself (v.)

- *Syn:* steel oneself, prepare.
- *Fr:* se préparer, s'armer de courage.

spawn (v.)

- *Syn:* generate, trigger, multiply.
- *Fr:* engendrer, pulluler.

loons (n. pl., informal)

- *Syn:* madmen, crackpots, eccentrics.
- *Fr:* des fous, des cinglés.

scapegoat (n.)

- *Syn:* whipping boy, fall guy.
- *Fr:* bouc émissaire.

Helen was said to be the most beautiful woman in the world, and if you've seen Nyong'o in anything, whether that be on the red carpet or acting for her Oscar in 12 Years A Slave, it's no wonder Nolan chose her for the role. Yet still the only thing people want to talk about is how they can't believe "thousands of men went to war for that woman". What they really want to say is that Black woman. There are no reliable depictions of Helen of Troy's appearance, yet any other creative choice would have gone over better than making her a Black woman – and a dark-skinned one at that. Dark-skinned Black women aren't represented nearly enough in films or TV. We never make it to the friendship group, and we're never the love interest unless it's to bridge the gap between the male lead and the white woman he's really meant to be with.

Only in shows and films that we make ourselves – which are far and few between – are we able to defy those tropes and act as we are, not who the world forces us to be. It's bad enough that our very presence in a film **ruffles the feathers** of racists everywhere and means it is dubbed woke propaganda. It's as if Black people aren't **woven into the fabric** of society and culture just as much as everyone else. The world is happy to take from Black people: our music, food, fashion, stories, and even our homes and our lives, but situations like this are a **stark** reminder to stay in our place. Malcolm X said "the most disrespected person in America is the Black woman". Decades later this still applies: everything about us is **fair game**. Defending against constant attacks on our looks, character and worth is a fight we didn't sign up for.

Whether it's Nyong'o in The Odyssey or Cynthia Erivo playing Elphaba in John Chu's Wicked – who was subjected to endless abuse for being too "dark", "ugly" or "masculine" to play a woman who doesn't exist and who is, and I can't emphasise this enough, green – the constant **pushback** against Black women in the public eye is a forceful reminder that, in society's view, we're at the bottom of the beauty chain. I've seen memes of Nyong'o's face swapped out with a monkey's, and videos dissecting her beauty and concluding she has none. This **misogynoir** is inescapable – and **triggering**. Every reshare, laughing-face emoji or clumsy photoshop job is a blow to our collective self-esteem, reminding us that no matter how much we empower each other, there's an army camping outside looking for a score to settle. But we won't let them. From Greek mythology to Shakespeare, Black women have always been present, and continue to deserve their seat at the table.

The fault lies with Western media that people adopt this stance against us, but even with it, look at how we prosper. Nyong'o probably knew her casting would cause such vicious reactions, but she did it anyway. Leading with beauty and courage, she's given us a performance we'll remember long after the **backlash**. "The Odyssey" is in cinemas now.

ruffle feathers (idiom)

- *Syn*: irritate, offend, upset.
- *Fr*: froisser, irriter.

woven into the fabric (idiom)

- *Syn*: deeply integrated, embedded.
- *Fr*: faire partie intégrante de.

stark (adj.)

- *Syn*: harsh, severe, absolute.
- *Fr*: flagrant, rude, saisissant.

fair game (idiom)

- *Syn*: open target, legitimate target.
- *Fr*: cible légitime, proie facile.

pushback (n.)

- *Syn*: opposition, resistance.
- *Fr*: rejet, opposition, tollé.

misogynoir (n.)

- *Syn*: intersectional prejudice.
- *Fr*: misogynoir (sexe + race).

triggering (adj.)

- *Syn*: distressing, traumatic.
- *Fr*: perturbant, traumatisant.

backlash (n.)

- *Syn*: outcry, hostile reaction.
- *Fr*: retour de bâton, tollé.